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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PNAT](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SHIA CLERIC: POOR EDUCATION FEEDS SECTARIANISM

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD FOR
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) In an April 23 meeting with PolOff, Sheikh Ayad al-Ekabi, a local Shia imam, deplored the manner in which religion is misused in Iraqi politics. He attributed the situation to the low level of education of many Iraqis. Despite Grand Ayatollah Sistani's injunction to "follow their minds," al-Ekabi remarked, many Iraqis turn to the Marjaiya for guidance on numerous issues. "Iraqis must be better educated in order to look beyond their sects and embrace secular, issues-based politics," he said. To illustrate this point, Ekabi told PolOff about a conversation he had with a man who claimed to oppose federalism because he thought it would lead to public indecency.

¶2. (C) In such an environment, al-Ekabi argued, the Marjaiya cannot yet disengage from politics and must continue to issue statements on many issues to clarify points of discussion. If they did not, politicians would twist the words of the Koran to suit their own agendas. Many politicians claim to be religious, al-Ekabi opined, but often they are hypocrites. For example, Ekabi said, Grand Ayatollah Sistani told Transitional National Assembly (TNA) members not to accept the 50,000 USD salary they were offered because the money would be better spent building Iraq. He said only 18 TNA members followed Grand Ayatollah Sistani's wishes, but declined to say which.

¶3. (C) Many Iraqis, al-Ekabi said, criticized the way Iraq's Presidency Council and the Council of Representatives Speaker and two deputies were chosen on April 22. He said the process harkened back to the days of Saddam Hussein because each position had only one candidate campaigning to fill it. Al-Ekabi said that many Iraqis resented that the candidates were chosen "in backroom deals." For this reason, he argued, Iraq does not yet have a national unity government, but merely a government in which the various sects share power. PolOff argued back that Iraq's various political groups should work together in order to negotiate a government of national unity and build strong democratic institutions.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: His reductio ad Saddamum rhetoric notwithstanding, Ekabi appeared open to engage in dialogue about means to promote democracy and national unity. He has offered to introduce PolOff to more like-minded imams. We will follow up on this offer and seek to engage Ekabi and other Shia clerics on the need for cross sectarian compromise as a basis for national unity. END COMMENT
KHALILZAD